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SUBJECT: STRIKING OVERSEAS WORKERS RETURN FROM JORDAN; PAID STRIKE
LEADER SEEKS PROTECTION IN BANGKOK

REFS: A) HANOI 0309; B) AMMAN 0902; C) HANOI 0356

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11. (SBU) Summary: On March 31, the last group of 157 striking overseas Vietnamese garment workers (Refs, A-C) were repatriated from Jordan and 156 arrived at Hanoi's Noi Bai Airport. According to knowledgeable third party sources, en route to Hanoi one of the returnees broke off from the group in Bangkok and may seek protection from the UNHCR office in Bangkok, claiming she was "a strike leader" and had accepted two thousand dollars from the U.S.-based NGO Boat People SOS (BPSOS) to "help other striking workers." The case has received extensive coverage in the Vietnamese media. End summary.

Striking Workers Return - One Stays in Bangkok

12. (SBU) On March 31, the last group of 157 striking overseas Vietnamese garment workers (Refs A-C) were repatriated from Jordan and 156 arrived at Hanoi's Noi Bai Airport via Bangkok. According to a knowledgeable third party sources, en route to Hanoi one of the returnees broke off from the group in Bangkok and may seek protection from the UNHCR office there. The woman reportedly was "a strike leader" and had accepted two thousand dollars from U.S.-based NGO, Boat People SOS (BPSOS) to "help other striking workers." She had spoken on Radio Free Asia a number of times, and claims that her family had been threatened, although it was unclear by whom. Therefore, she allegedly believes she will be persecuted by the GVN upon returning to Vietnam. (Note: GVN authorities also confirmed with us that one of the returnees had "disappeared" at the transit airport but did not elaborate on the reason. End note.)

13. (SBU) According to the GVN Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA), there were originally 266 Vietnamese employees working at two different garment factories in Jordan in January 2008. Five had returned to Vietnam before a widely-publicized February 19 strike and scuffle with Jordanian police. Since the strike and subsequent labor negotiations with the Taiwanese apparel employer and Jordanian security and labor authorities, 104 Vietnamese workers chose to remain and work in Jordan, after being cleared by the employer and GOJ authorities, while 157 left for Hanoi in several groups over the last two weeks of March. Commercial flights back to Hanoi were facilitated by a team of GVN officials and Vietnamese recruitment company officials. It is unclear how many of the 157 willingly left Jordan or were rejected for re-employment by the employer or GOJ authorities.

GVN Arrangements for Returnees

¶4. (SBU) According to MOLISA officials, they had asked the recruiters to arrange vehicles at Hanoi's airport to pick up arriving returnees but none of these workers reportedly used the pre-arranged vehicles. They either went back home individually or in groups to their home provinces, where they remain today. Both MOLISA and MFA officials told Poloffs on April 7 that no returnees were detained by the government or by the recruiters. The recruiters are now preparing the necessary procedures so that they and the workers can terminate the labor contracts. MOLISA has requested that the recruiters liquidate the contracts in strict accordance with Vietnamese law and report the outcome to MOLISA. Again, both MOLISA and MFA officials confirmed to Poloffs that the returnees would not face any legal prosecution after returning to Vietnam as they had not violated Vietnamese law.

¶5. (SBU) According to MOLISA officials, when the recruiters liquidate the labor contracts, the workers may have to compensate the recruitment firm a certain amount of money for breaking their contracts; the recruiters are supposed to report details of the contract liquidations to MOLISA. It is unclear, however, to what extent the workers rather than the recruitment firms violated the terms of their contracts.

Continuing Coverage by Vietnamese Media

¶6. (SBU) Several Hanoi-based newspapers and news websites on March 20 published a press statement by MFA spokesman Le Dung regarding this case. Two of our regular press contacts at local newspapers said they did not receive any instruction to stop reporting on the case; however, they did not continue to report on the case as the issue had died down and price inflation stories were receiving more attention from the general public.

¶7. (SBU) Tuoi Tre, a leading daily in HCMC, was the first newspaper which broke the story and extensively reported on it. A Tuoi Tre reporter told LES that the GVN told the media to "be careful" in reporting this issue but not to stop reporting on it. Tuoi Tre had a story on the case on its website on March 21.

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¶8. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City.
MICHALAK